

VALUE CREATION

Economies generally flourish when policies and practices reward value creation.



Doing fruitful work that creates value for others is an essential way we live out our faith. However, that by itself is not enough. Our work is embedded in the structures of our culture and civilization. This includes the policies and practices of governments, businesses, and many other types of institutions. Work has personal meaning for each of us, but it also has a public meaning for our culture. The ways in which each person works, and in which each person understands his or her work, are dramatically affected by this public meaning. To live faithfully, Christians must be aware of how these policies and practices do and do not align with our faith.

Our civilization has a modern, entrepreneurial economy in which all people have (in principle) the same rights to work, own, and exchange. We have mostly rejected the paternalistic systems of arbitrary power and privilege that prevailed all over the world before the modern era, and still exist in many parts of the world today. An entrepreneurial economy creates important moral and spiritual challenges that the church must confront. But on the whole it is a tremendous improvement over the degrading and destructive injustices of paternalistic systems.

Pastors teach general moral truths in ways that are contextualized to their culture, and help people understand the meaning of their lives – the public meaning, not just the personal meaning.

However, there have always been paternalistic and unjust policies and practices in our civilization. Some have reinforced racial and ethnic hierarchies. Others were designed to enrich public or corporate officeholders, or their various cronies and constituencies. Still others have encouraged dependency, or racked up debt to avoid facing hard choices, or established artificial rewards for behavior that consumes value without creating it. And there have been many other forms of injustice.

The church cannot be the church if it does not bear witness for justice. The institutions of our civilization must take good care of their own legitimate interests, but they exist to create value for the common good, not to serve themselves. When they abandon value creation and serve only the private good of particular individuals or groups, they commit injustice.

So the church must speak up for policies and practices that encourage and reward value creation. It is not the role of pastors to take sides in partisan or ideological conflicts. However, it is very much the role of pastors to teach general moral truths in ways that are contextualized to their culture, and help people understand the meaning of their lives – the public meaning, not just the

personal meaning. The church must speak to the *polis*, the public order, and in that sense it must be “political” without being partisan.

We can identify trans-partisan moral commitments to which our civilization ought to be held to account. This is not easy or simple, but it can and must be done. The justice and economic growth we have enjoyed for two centuries came about largely because the church, in the period that preceded the Industrial Revolution, was effective in bearing witness to equal human dignity. We can do the same today. Who knows what new victories for justice our children and grandchildren might be in a position to achieve if we are faithful now?